

Chapter 1

Reflection

I yawned, stretching my paws out in front of me until they dangled over the edge the floor boards; slightly admiring the delicate clacking of onyx claws on the stone steps below. The sun was shining brightly in the middle of the early afternoon sky, and somehow seemed to make that empty blueness all the more, well, blue. It did nothing for me though, as I lay in the shade of Yohn -the oak cabin- and hid quite well from its rays. It wasn't that I disliked the sun. Really, there was nothing more that I enjoyed than doozing off under a midday light, but today I wished for nothing more than to *avoid* drawing attention to myself; that wasn't even mildly plausible in sunlight. My fur, while merely a snow-white in the shade, reflected light like sunshine off of clean silver, on the stripe down my back. Not to mention the drastic difference between my violet mane (tipped in the same reflective white no less) and the rest of me. It wasn't difficult to miss a five foot, shiny, purple haired beast strolling by.

"Hey! Hey doggie!"

I perked my large pointed ears in the direction the sound came from. My dull violet eyes opened and focused oval pupils on a group of young guys snickering and gestering towards me. Somehow, my pitiful ploy at hiding didn't seem to be working very well. Dang.

"Fetch rover!" one of the group shouted tauntingly, waving a stick around above his head, "Get it!"

I watched with a snort as he let the stick fly towards me, but wasn't about to get up on his behalf. A mere flick of one of my double tails sent the branch rocketing back in their direction, and the youngsters scattered to avoid being struck.

"What kinda dog *are* you anyway? Not even being able to catch a *stick*?!"

I wrinkled my black nose at the term. Dog. I was no *dog*. I was an Ananke. Yes, perhaps the physical form of us was a bit canid, but we were much more. Yes, much. Our keen eyesight allowed us to see for miles, our noses could catch the faintest scent on the wind, and our large ears could detect an insect walking along a leaf. Our soft coats kept us both warm and cold depending on what we required, was water proof, and our hides were pretty much damage proof as well. With strong legs, and hind paws triple in size from our front, we were agile and quick, and more than efficient hunters and trackers. Ananke were an old and ancient race, mastering many languages and could often recall times in history that humans and other species had forgotten long ago. We were historians that rivaled the knowledge of the Kin (the dragons) and the Clan (the gryphons), and our healing secrets were sought after by the Mares (unicorns) themselves. Despite this -and what I thought- for the most part Ananke were humble beasts who kept to themselves and strived for peace and balance. We were not without our pride of course, and I for one, someone who once had nothing to be proud about, refused to be demeaned by ignorant species.

Of course, not everyone knew of the Ananke, or perhaps they just didn't care. Our numbers had deminished over the centeries, and a race once filled with mystic ability, now had a Magical Birth maybe once out of every thousand litters, and there was no garruntee that the kitling would live. Many people,

especially Humans, often mistook us for large wolves, or Beast Dai'zen (the 'Demon Beasts' as we nicknamed them), but not many if any, ever called us by our name anymore and even less remembered the respect we were once given.

But that was exactly why I wished to remain in the shadows today. It was 'move in' day here at Gakuen'ho, the leading (or should I say only?) martial arts academy in all of Khanshomei. Classes had been out for Tyui, the warm season stretching from Tai'Sung to Seng'Guen -a period of four months- but Az'ki (the third month in) was always the hottest and any strenuous activity caused being outdoors to be nearly unbearable. Even now, a couple of weeks into Seng'Guen, it was still very warm, but at least students wouldn't be in trouble of heat stroke or something.

I had stayed here during the past month, as did a meager few from other cabins; mostly senior students who would be helping the seuin (teachers, basically) this year with classes. I didn't have much of a family to go home to anyway, much unlike the younger ones. True, I had my pack and they had been very accepting of me and nurturing, but it wasn't the same. No matter how much I admired the Ananke for giving me something I thought I'd never have, and no matter how much I loved being a part of their world, I would always be different.

With a twinge like a small electrical shock, I sat up and dangled my newly formed human legs over the side of Yohn, leaning my shoulder against the door frame and poking at the spiked wrist band on my right arm. It always found a way to get caught in the leather straps further up on my arm. I wore a lot of jewelry for being a tomboy. On my left arm, was a long gold and silver trimmed gauntlet, while at the top of each arm, I wore golden rings which kept my fingerless gloves in place; around my neck, a gold ringlet which chained together in the front and supported smaller silver rings on either side -it was the only piece of jewelry I kept in my transformation. Needless to say, taking human form had its perks, albeithem small at best. I acquired a cool wardrobe in the process. My deep violet vest trimmed at the arms and around my ribs in silver, my black gloves which started at my biceps, held together in the middle with 'x' stitches, fingerless, though with a purple patch around the thumbs. I wore a thick, brown and green, suade belt around my waist, and for pants, I had knee cut-offs, black with a violet stripe down the outsides and ended with a flourite gem and a dinky bow (which I personally could have done witout); all of this ended with knee high socks, black in the back, violet in the front, and my deep violet slip-on shoes.

So yes, this was why I was so different than other Ananke, why I'd never be able to fit in like all of the others. I could take human form, or was it, 'I could take my old form'? Seven years ago, I wasn't an Ananke, heck, I wasn't even in Khanshomei back then. Originally, I was from a world this one called Hurimei, or 'World of Metal'. I still had to keep myself from calling it Earth. Well, I was from Canada to be exact, on the eastern coast, Atlantic Provinces. Though really, I preferred not to think about it, and always tried to satisfy myself, or convince myself, that Khanshomei was my home, always had been. But I knew it wasn't true.

I had lived all of my nineteen years in the 'care' of my mother, which I can assure you, was much less than the prime of my existence. I had never been the daughter she wanted, not only because I didn't fancy things that were 'all the rage' like clothing or make-up or jewelry, I also didn't enjoy spending my time shopping or dating. My eighty's in school were never high enough, I was never sporty or really fit either. Even my Native heritage seemed to anger her. No, I enjoyed writing, and drawing, reading, spent my free time in the school library or at home on the computer, wore jeans and t-shirts and had no immediate interest in the male of the species. It wouldn't have mattered had I been interested in those things to begin with, I still would have been the daughter she never wanted; why she hadn't gotten rid of me like she did the one before me I'll never know. Perhaps it was her insaciable need to control someone. I was hers after all, she could treat me and handle me as only she pleased. Everything I owned, was merely 'borrowed' from her, and someday, I felt like my very existence was merely borrowed time.

My father had been little help in the issue. I was never the daughter he longed for either and he walked out of my life when I was only two. Perhaps if I had been some new form of liquor, he'd have found more to be proud of. When he *was* there for me, it was only to get back at my mother for something; usually money related. Neither of them seemed to ever have enough money to 'take care' of me. My stepfather would have been good friends with him. They had similar methods to dealing with me; pretending that I didn't exist.

School was of little relief. While I could escape my home life, I had just as many Miserables (as I called them) to deal with there; teachers included. Who knew that 'helping' me, included telling all of my darkest secrets to the very woman who was causing them? Wish I'd known this before I spilled my guts to them. And hence, my anti-socialness was born.

I tried many things to escape it all. Even the cowards way out. Slitting my wrist. I could have damned that knife at the time, for not being sharp enough to do away with me. When that didn't work, I satisfied myself with allowing the pain of the wounds to help me escape my reality. When that no longer worked, I made my final plans.

One night, late into the evening I removed the screen from my window and ran into the woods behind our-*her* house. It was the middle of winter, and I remember...so cold. I have no idea how long I walked, or even how far. All I remember is how much it hurt, and how tired I was. I don't know when I stopped, or when I fell asleep, but I wouldn't have complained had I never woken up. It was that light that woke me. That pure, bright, *warm* light. I had never been a religious person (another fault in 'her' eyes), but I still can't explain to this day why I followed it. But I did. And it wasn't until it was too late, that I realized where it had led me.

After that, all I really recall is the loud crack as the ice beneath my feet gave way, and the shock to my body as the icy water filled my lungs to capacity and the blackness at the bottom of the lake covering my eyes. That is, until *He* saved me, or should I say, recreated me. I have no clue how I ended up in Khanshomei, or how long I was unconscious, all I know is that He was there, and that for the most part, was responsible for my new start at life.

His name, or what I knew of it, was Jian. Tall, with gorgeous shining white hair, and those deep, kind, wine-red eyes, and cloaked from head to foot in intricate embroidery silks, and robes. He called himself a 'lost soul'. I could never figure out just what he meant, but that didn't much matter; the guy had power up to yingyang and back. He wasn't one for subtlety either (I blame my bluntness on him), especially when he told me about how he found me. Something along the lines of 'frozen corpse' rings a bell. Jian explained how my body had been all but destroyed by the cold, my lungs so damaged that they'd never take a breath again, and how he went in search for 'donors'. He told me how the deity Typhaine offered to watch over my soul and keep me from passing on, of how the Ananke offered to take me in, and how the old pack leader, Wolph, gave me a new body in his image. Lastly, how the frost deity Eyce gave me some of his power, a sort of apology since his element kind of, sort of killed me.

For the next six years, I alternated between living with the Azra pack and traveling with Jian all over Khanshomei. Adjusting to my new Ananke body was difficult I'll admit. Even though I had been given an adult body, I needed to learn all of the basics all over again; standing, walking, running, even simple things like chewing had to be learned from scratch and I can't count the amount of times I bit my own tongue with those damn fangs. But I also learned other Ananke things. Their history and beliefs, how to track and hunt and read stars and weather conditions, how to communicate with other creatures, the laws of the forest, not to mention pack edicate. When I was with Jian, I learned about Khanshomei; about the different lands and what they had to offer, the emperors and the gods, not to mention the language, though to my surprise, what they called Enguru was practically my english anyway, minus the occasional Koisuuru slang. He also taught me the basics of survival here, how my tanned skin in human

form, would make me a prized target to certain slave rings. With this in mind, Jian began to teach me Kahaku; the mastery of using a long curved bladed sword in battle. A normal curved blade sword in this world was named a Hakuri, but Jian specialized in a rare art; he wielded a beautiful Konii, which was twice as long as a normal Hakuri -reaching about four feet in length- and was double edged. He surprised me a year later, and presented me with my own.

So that started my training and Jian taught me everything that he himself knew. I'm proud to say, that I was able to master the art, and was a pretty formidable opponent in battle. But that was what brought me to Gakuen'ho. Jian told me, that while I could now wield a sword, and understood my Ananke form, it was time to learn my element; the ability over frost and cold that Eyce gave me. Though I'm pretty sure it also had something to do with my having accidentally frozen his bath water...while he was in it.

So here I was. My second year. In all truth, I was only mildly looking forward to it. I didn't much like the idea of the new students running around, some of them were mere children, and I didn't dare walk around their cabins (the To'hen barracks) in Ananke form, since the last time I did, the nasty little monsters decided I was a 'horsie'. The older ones weren't much better. Besides for the dog comments, I was the only girl here amongst about a hundred boys when the place was full, and that didn't include the seuu's. While I was technically more educated in battle than most of them were, weapons weren't allowed on the premises unless one was being used for learning purposes in the observation of a seuu. Besides that, fighting amongst nin's (students) was strictly against rules. I bared my fangs once at a group of boys who had been taunting me for over an hour, and got a month's worth of stall duty and weapons polishing, not to mention a week's additional kitchen clean-up for calling the seuu who caught me an 'ignorant skin'; a nasty Ananke term for humans...usually forbidden even amongst Ananke. Needless to say Kohr, my pack leader, was informed as well and when I paid the pack a visit during the cold season break, I was forced to watch over the kitlings and nearly had my tail fur all but yanked out by the teething bastards.

This only made the older nin's taunt me all the more, hoping to get me in trouble again. But that was one thing they would quickly learn about me; fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice shame on me. And I don't like being made the fool. Besides, I had quickly been given my justice and it made all of the other nin's insanely jealous.

That something, was Resshou-ka. He was the one who founded Gakuen'ho over five thousand and seventy years ago, and was considered a martial arts genius; knowing over one hundred official arts, they're sub-techniques (some of those official forms had up to ten or twenty subs), and forty forms of street fighting. To balance that out, he was a very refined man; being able to spout out philosophy and poetry on a whim, songs and dance, music, acrobatics, you name it. As well, he had been trained originally, by Tooyani. A man called the Father of Martial Arts, who created the most sought after art; Tai'shan, the only martial art said to be effective against even the gods themselves. Sadly, Tooyani died over six thousand years ago after having only passed on a mere quarter of the art form. Which brings forward another special trait of Resshou-ka's. He was a demi-god, or a semi-mortal, whichever you prefer. Something about his mother having fallen in love with a mortal man? It didn't matter to me, because Resshou-ka would be *my* seuu, and my *only* seuu, and most of all, I was going to be taught Tai'shan.

Only those with an advanced ki (spiritual energy), could ever hope to learn Tai'shan since it required great stamina, speed, agility and of course, the ability to mold one's ki. In my case, I was an Ice Elemental and a pure one; this actually was good, since I had long since had a weak knee that just would not heal. What this meant, was that not everyone who had elemental blood, was capable of learning Tai'shan. There was a boy in year three who was a mild water elemental, complete with webbed hands and feet and patches of scale on his body, while in this year's new nin's, I had all ready spotted a beast elemental who had claws and fangs. Neither of them had the ki control to learn the martial art, and Resshou-ka himself told me that I would be the first in fifty years that he had taught.

Not to mention, Resshou-ka was the coolest seinu in all of Gakuen'ho. He was a huge guy, seven foot easy (I'm guessing it had something to do with that deity blood in him), and he was...well....beautiful. I couldn't call him handsome, because he wasn't. While having short hair, it was a lovely cherry starting in the bangs and fading to blond; sleek and shiney with ocean blue eyes and a spotless complexion. And while he had broad shoulders and was quite muscular, he had distinguishable feminine hips and long slender legs; again, unmistakably a trademark of his heritage. He often walked around wearing his cream colored mantle and cloak, which hid well everything but his head, but I had a strange feeling he did this merely to protect the first year nin's. The last one he caught making girly comments about him mysteriously had his underwear tied to the flag pole one morning for the entire courtyard to see. Resshou-ka, was an uncontrollable prankster and a master at playing innocent. If you gave him an excuse to get you, he would.

Another plus that I had to admit, was that nin's were seperated into groups by year and the form of martial art they were learning. Some had up to ten nin's a cabin, while rarer arts or older students could be seen with still five or seven a cabin. Me though, I got Yohn all to myself. And because I was the only girl, I couldn't in good conscience use the nin showers and bathes like everyone else, so I got to 'borrow' the seinu's hot springs whenever I needed to wash; there had been trouble in the past with male nins thinking it a good idea to spy on girls when they shared the combined showers, so since then, girls had always been given use of the seinu's. Only Desu-seinu had a problem with it, but that guy got a bloody nose if you even *mentioned* the word 'woman' around him. He was such a P.I.D. Pervert In Denial. But it was fun teasing him.

For the most part, the teachers were all okay. Resshou-seinu would always be the best, but they all had their good points. Along with martial arts, the teachers here also taught other subjects. Since Gakuen'ho was pretty much a full time committment, nin's couldn't attend regular schools and so things like math, astronomy, language, ethics, and government had to be accounted for. Desu-seinu taught anatomy, which with keeping his 'weakness' in mind, was rather ironic. He taught students about muscle mass, and how the body functioned (which comes in handy with training), though I heard he nearly had an annemic fit when he had to teach the second years about sexual education. I had to admit, he was a good looking young man, about twenty seven or so -the teachers never told us their ages- with black hair which he kept short in the back, but allowed his bangs to grow very long in the front. He also wore glasses, which I found strange at first seeing them, as this world didn't seem the kind to have such a modern thing. Desu was also a very prim and proper sort of guy; shirt tucked in, never a wrinkle, that sort of thing. But he was obsessed with black. Moreso than me.

Tonna-seinu was the newest seinu to come to Gakuen'ho. He graduated the year before I came and started teaching last year. He was in charge of language and government classes; a brain if there ever was one. Sharp as a tack and all that. He was nice and everything, but had a bad habit of going into long, techincal and complicated lectures about how the old languages were being lost and how the ethics of the governments were slowly being dismissed by the people. His classes had put more than a fair share of nin's asleep and needless to say this gave Resshou-ka plenty of excuses to prank every last one of them. Tonna was the complete opposite of Desu clothing-wise. He was sloppy, not that his clothing was ever dirty, it just seemed old and ragged, and never seemed to match. His dark brown hair was always messy and uncombed, while his matching brown eyes sometimes looked tired. Though I had seen his cabin light on many a late night, and could only assume that he was busy writing up lesson plans. He loved his work after all.

Then there was Kaeya. After Resshou, I got along best with Kaeya. He had to be well into his thirties, but he didn't act it. He could party with the best of the younger nins, and it was rumored that many of the 'secret' parties that went on within Gakuen'ho were put together by him. He had greying pale blue hair, and big, gentle black eyes. He was also a bit scruffy, but it matched him so perfectly, no body ever really noticed. Kaeya was the survivals seinu. He would take groups of nin's into the woods surrounding

Gakuen'ho for camping trips -for the younger ones- in which he taught them things like tracking, safe and unsafe food and water sources, starting a fire and keeping it under control as well as tending to wounds with surrounding herbs and wild remedies. For older nin's he would lead them a safe distance into the woods, and then 'mysteriously disappear'; leaving them to use their abilities learned in previous years to survive and find their way back to camp. This was part of the reason I liked Kaeya. He never truly left the nin's to their own in case one should get hurt, and would just watch over them in secret. I would always get a training-free camping trip whenever he did this, since there were no better trackers than Ananke, and I could spy on them easy as pie without their knowing. Kaeya was also incredibly respectful of nature and me as well, which earned him my trust and friendship pretty fast.

There was also Inu, the only guy here more girly than Resshou himself. He had long blond hair that he kept tied, but flipped over his shoulder to hang down in front and stroked it every chance he got (he was a bit of a narcissist). He had pale violet eyes, and accented this with fancy clothing composed of only violets-or so he claimed. Inu was in charge of cooking, since there was nothing more important to a Gannen (I still had a habit of calling them ninja's like back on Earth...) than healthy food. And Inu was a stickler when it came to perfect cooking. "Tantalizing food shall energize your body and enrich your minds my children!". He also had the worlds most annoying laugh, and I couldn't count how many times he's been the butt of jokes around the courtyard. Though in all reality, I didn't hear a one of them complain when we would get the most delicious meals everyday and I had to give him bonus points for helping me find the ingredients to make a pizza.

Onako was my least favorite of the seinu's. Not so much because of him directly, but because he was the maths and astronomy's seinu; the first of the subjects, one I had always hated, and the second being a subject I had all ready learned from being in the Azra pack, and humans read the stars differently than Ananke; I can say without doubt, that humans are doomed to get lost if they continue to do things their way. Onako was also very strict about how things were done, and your level of attention in his classes. He was also the seinu who caught me that time growling at the group of nin's and never wasted any time since then, taunting me about what I called him that day; albeit in a somewhat friendly manner. He could always be spotted a mile away, since he was never without the bright red bandana he wore to hide the fact that he was bald. Onako was only in his early twenties, but the on-going joke with the nin's was that in his first year at Gakuen'ho he was tricked into drinking a solution that made *a//* of his hair fall out. *Everywhere*. I guessed it could be true. I had never seen him with facial hair, though I'd never really been close enough to him to take notice of his arms and didn't really wish to know about any other areas.

Shinesu, or more well known Tedi-seinu, was the resident 'big brother', as well as being the healer who ran the small hospice at the edge of the camp. We called him "Tedi" as a play on the word teddy-bear, since he spent much of his time playing with and comforting the youngest nin's (some only five or six years old), who often got home sick or just scared at night in their new surroundings. Because of this, his clothing was always wrinkled, or ripped, or dirty in some way or another, and his short, blond and brown patchy hair always seemed dusty, though his navy eyes always had a lively sparkle to them. There wasn't a soul who didn't like him, and he was always fascinated by my Ananke form and had let me get away with my share of rule breakings over the past year. Not to mention the fact of him always having sweets around to shar; toffee's, many flavored hard candies, and even some sweet Nikar sap which could be chewed like bubblegum.

Lastly, there was Abiki. That guy just creeped me out like nothing else. He was the ki and meditations seinu, who taught nin's about their own special spiritual energy and how to mold it and use it to their advantage; although no one but a pure elemental could physically form and mold raw ki, other nins were capable of connecting with their ki through meditation. But not only was Abiki a ki seinu, he was practically a ki master. And a human formed Dai'zen to boot. He always wore bandages wrapped around his eyes, completely concealing them, and yet could see or at least function, as though he had the worlds most perfect vision. There were little stories that floated around from time to time that suggested he was

actually blind, and you couldn't deny the possibility since no one had seen him without the wrappings. Abiki also had, well, spikes; trailing up the bridge of his nose and into his silver bangs and fiery orange hair, encircling his shoulders, on the backs of his hands, and down the front of his torso. These as well he kept wrapped in bandages over his clothing. I knew it was the most common form of Dai'zen anatomy, but I had only ever witnessed in on beast varieties in past, and the human forms were much more....sadistic? He never *once* harmed a nin, or another seinu, but you couldn't help but keep your distance from him. Abiki seemed to show up out of no where, and his deep monotone voice could give the boogiemans the shivers. Not to mention the long claws and fangs and he loved nothing more than to talk of death and decay. It was no wonder he only taught the older students. The younger ones would never sleep again. And the worst of it, was that if you *weren't* afraid of him, he did his darndest to give you a scare. My first week here, he grabbed me from behind and nipped my neck with those fangs of his. I could have killed him.

I had gotten the pleasure of meeting them all last year. While I was to be learning Tai'shan, Resshou-seinu needed to know exactly where I stood on everything and I also needed to learn the basics first. So I took Anatomy with Desu and learned about muscles and nerves, pressure points, and the circulatory system, Government and Languages with Tonna in which I had to give an essay on Ananke Communications (since I was the only one who *could*), made more smoke than healthy food in Cooking with Inu, who I'm sure couldn't wait to get rid of me, and learned to fear my own shadow with Abiki, though I had learned at least a little control over my ki from him; if anyone ever needed an automatic snowball maker, or ice to freshen their drink, they could always call me. As far as Kaeya and Onako went, I excelled in the first, and nearly flunked the second. So drastic were the two sides, that a deal was struck. I was asked to become a seinu-ibi (teachers aid) for Kaeya, as he needed the second set of eyes for his survival weeks. For Onako, I was asked to help give lectures on Ananke astral charts. If I did that, Resshou-seinu wouldn't fail me and make me take the class again. I despised speaking in front of crowds, and didn't much like the idea of giving up spare time to teach, but it was better to deal with Onako an hour every few days, than every day for the next year learning the same exact junk all over again. Plus, it seemed as though Resshou-seinu was almost as anxious as me to start my formal training.

I had been told though, over the Tyui break that I would still be doing some of my training with Abiki, which really I didn't mind. For as much as I hated him, I liked him equally as much. His constant attempts to spook me were nothing more than amusing games to him and he meant no harm. Instinctually as well, the Dai'zen and the Ananke were close friends and unlike Humans, the two species never developed a fear of each other.

Abiki had taught me rather trivial things last year (somehow I didn't see the talent in making snowballs out of thin air with my ki), but he had taught me more than he was supposed to. First year Tai'shan-Nins are supposed to learn nothing more than meditation and calling forth their ki, recognizing it, and shifting it or gathering it to different parts of their body. Molding it came later on. Yet he had taught me how. But this additional training also kept me from using my ki by accident, since I could identify it and on some level, control it.

I also asked over the break, if this year I could have Shinesu as a healing mentor. While we learned about herbs and things from Kaeya, there were other aspects that I wished to learn. Some of which included techniques I could use to strengthen my weakened knee. Otherwise, it would be an obvious flaw in any spar or battle I took place in from here on out, and if that was one thing we had learned, was to never show your enemy your weakness.

"Naio ShenTao-ninsu!"

I cocked my head to the side as I rested it against the old door frame. There was only one person in all of Gakuen'ho who referred to me as 'ninsu'; the term *supposed* to be used by younger students to address older ones. Spying the owner of the voice, I gave a friendly wave back to the young, navy haired

boy who strolled on by, a large sack over his shoulder and a set of chuhaku (nunchucks) on his hip. His name was Hasuryu Kote'iki. A thirteen year old, second year nin like myself, though he was on a considerably lower level as far as his art form went. It's not that the boy didn't have talent, in fact, he was a pure water elemental (and surprisingly didn't have fins or gills like the other guy) and *could* have taken Tai'shan like me. Had he wanted to, that is.

Kote'iki-han had come to here early last year to plead his case to Resshou-ka, and ask to join Gakuen'ho as a nin. Most of the other nins had a field day with this one, since it was well known that *no one* ever asked to be a part of the academy. Resshou always did extensive research into the lives and abilities of each nin, and it was *always* Resshou who sent out the invitations to join. But I'll give him this much, Kote'iki had spunk, and a good head on his shoulders and more than showed himself and his talents to Resshou-ka. And so, he was accepted.

Come to find out, Kote'iki-han had a substantial amount of martial arts influence and history behind him. His father, Hasuryu Wez, had been a celebrated Gyouin-Chuhaku (basically he was an elite in his field), who had trained at Gakuen'ho years before. He had been offered a seinu job, but turned it down and returned to the small fishing village he had grown up in. He fell in love, married, and started a family.

Then a few years ago, before I ever arrived, a large country war had swept over Khanshomei, with the northern 'dark continent', Opez at the reins. The destruction this battle caused was massive and seemingly unending. Even years later, when I was traveling with Jian, you couldn't help but take notice of the old burnt houses and deity shrines, ravaged forests and devastated fields and rivers; whole towns destroyed and still vacant and bare to this day. Wez-ka's village had been one of those most hard hit. While not completely totalled, it was a vast ocean port, and wanted by Opez as one of its bases. Being a large commercial village, Yokia wasn't without protection, but it would prove futile. Apparently, late into the night an army of Opez Gyouin attacked and crippled the village something awful, killing off every last one of Yokia's own Gyouin. Wez being one of those men.

Kote'iki wasn't without injuries as well. His house had been burned to the ground, and his mother while trying to save him and herself, lost the use of her legs, and he, practically all of his hearing. He had grown up without having attended any school and did what he could to make ends meet for him and his mother, but it had proved difficult with his partial hearing lost. In fact, back then he could barely talk. And a couple of years ago, his mother had finally surmised her hard life and passed away. But if there was one thing his mother was ever able to give him, was a sense of pride. Kote'iki had never allowed anyone to talk down to him, and held a lot of the natural talents for chuhaku that his father had. I wasn't sure how he ended up hearing about Gakuen'ho, but I was sure there wasn't a more deserving nin here.

Resshou had been able to provide him with an ear piece that fit over the damaged ear itself, and allowed Kote'iki to hear just like anyone else, and had fully offered to enlist him as a Tai'shan nin. But he quite bluntly refused. Nothing was going to stop Kote'iki-han from following in his father's footsteps; even the chance to become one of the most powerful Tai'shan-Gyouin's in all of Khanshomei. In some instances it was probably better. He was happier this way, and having only discovered his elemental gifts a couple of years earlier, there really wasn't much there to develop yet. His ki still had a lot of growing to do and the first part of that could only be done naturally. Resshou-ka said that water elemental ki just wasn't as aggressive a power as the other elements. It was nothing that could be helped.

I had gotten to know Kote'iki when we shared a few of the same classes last year. For the most part, he's a swell guy and if I ever needed to be partnered up with someone for a project, he's the one I'd choose. His bad side? Well, let me just say that it took me three quarters of the year to convince him that just because I was a girl, I wasn't going to automatically *die* just because someone threw a fake punch at me. Dai forbid, he had been in my ki class with Abiki. He'd have never let me near the guy. Needless to say, Kote'iki had the old fashioned streak of men having to be there to protect women. It was cute, to a point,

and sometimes he went well over that point. But it was understandable. He had lived his life protecting and caring for his mother. There was really no other reason for him to think differently. But I had managed to convince him that I would be okay. How, I have no clue. But he didn't worry about me every other second anymore.

"Hey Pup! I see ya didn't roast over break, good to see. I'd be sad otherwise. "

I smirked at the voice, and knew who it was even before I seen him. Yazaki Koi. A spikey, black haired, pale, violet eyed, flirt extraordinaire. That was the only way to really describe him. He wasn't truly happy unless he was flirting. I was sure the school term nearly killed him every year, what with there being no girls around, besides me that is. And I assure you, he had wasted no time in hunting me out.

Koi was a third year nin, sixteen years old, and studying Kahaku much like I had with Jian. The only difference was that he was using the 'normal' hakuri, instead of the rarer konii. He had grown quite skilled in the art over just three years, and I had heard rumors that next year could very well be his last if he kept gaining ground at his current rate. How he had managed to get into Gakuen'ho was beyond me though. Most of the nins came from some sort of martial art background, or were born with special abilities, Koi however, was neither of these. He openly admitted being apart of some bandit group in the T'hain mountains just outside of a village named K'odo. Not that they were all that bad. It was well known that the T'hain group protected and watched over the town in return for some food or clothing, or other supplies. In fact, Jian and I had had contact with them and their leader Ghen was young but very kind; even if he *was* a bit of a party-animal. It was T'haine that Koi returned to every chance he got, Ghen being his best friend and all. He had also gotten his share of wounds with his bandit lifestyle. Koi always wore a form-fitting cloth mask over the lower part of his face to hide the large scar that stretched diagonal acrossed his mouth. No one really knew how he got the injury, but for those who had managed to catch a glimpse of it during meals, knew that it had been very painful, very destructive, and that he was lucky he didn't lose his jaw.

But despite his 'home life' Koi was a hard working and valiant nin, who wore Gakuen'ho's metal plated symbol (we all got one) proudly on a bandana around his head. Besides, it was impossible that Resshou-seinu wasn't aware of all of this, and he had invited Koi to come here as a nin anyway. Clearly, Resshou seen something in him that many didn't. Even I had to admit, Koi was *good*. He and I had given a Kahaku demonstration last year and had been given our respective weapons in order to spar and show the entire academy. The point had been to show how two different people, having been taught the same art, could have two different techniques. Koi had easily kept me on my toes, and the mock battle went on for nearly five minutes before Resshou called a halt. I had been unable to disarm Koi.

"Well, well, what do we have here? A puny little nin lost his way? Huh? Why don't you answer Squirt?"

I moaned as I tilted my head yet more to gaze on down the courtyard. It was not uncommon to have older nins picking on the younger ones. This was a school after all, and while we were all here to learn, it seemed some could not resist the chance to show themselves to be 'superior'. There were never any rules stating that certain area's of Gakuen'ho were off limits to nins, yet somewhere along the way, a few had decided that each Gannen could only remain around their respective cabins and Dai forbid we wander into 'enemy territory'. I personally found it all rather boring, not to mention repetative and idiotic. Picking on each other was no different than starting fights to Resshou-seinu and the other seinu's and could get you in just as much trouble. Why those few insisted on keeping it up, I had no idea. Someday's it made me glad that I was no longer truly human. Otherwise, I might feel a bit insulted.

I stretched and got to my feet, slowly slaundering over a bit closer to the action. There was a group of about three older nins, all three of which I had seen around on more than one occasion causing trouble for the younger ones. I never really knew their names, but they all took pride in seeing which one could scare the younger ones the most.

"You'd better watch out walking around these parts. "

"W-why?"

"Because if your not careful, the *Spike Monster* will get you!"

They were talking about Abiki. It was one of their favorite games. Spread rumors about a spiked monster or demon wandering around in the shadows of Gakuen'ho, and the second they ever laid eyes upon him, they'd high tail it out of there screaming their heads off; Abiki meanwhile had to wonder what the heck he did *this* time.

Taking a quick peak around, I covered my mouth with one hand, while forming a crude yet -I hoped- effective hand seal with the other; my middle and index fingers raised, my ring and pinky fingers folded. Giving a small "achoo", I focused my ki into the hand, and got to watch in amusement as a patch of ice appeared beneath their feet. Now covering my face with the back of my hand to hide my own chuckling, I got the show of a lifetime as they slipped and stumbled all over each other, and gave rather loud shouts as they fell quite hard on their backsides. Of course, by the time they had a chance to look for what they slipped on, the ice had vanished.

My victory was short lived however, when I felt a large hand come down on my shoulder. I could have jumped out of my skin, and had a feeling it would have been a better fate. So with a nervous smile, I turned to look up at my captor.

"N..naio Resshou-seinu, " I said, knowing all too well that the look on my face practically screamed 'guilty!'.

"Why naio to you as well Shen-han, " he smiled back down at me, "Lovely day, isn't it?"

"Yes Resshou-seinu. "

"How bizzare for there to be patches of *ice* on such a warm day, hmm?" he said, that sly tone in his voice causing a helpless shiver to run down my spine, "My what a wonder nature is. "

"I sneezed, " I lied, shrugging my shoulders and doing my best to sound honest, "You know how it is, Seinu. Sneezing is an involuntary reaction. Can't be helped. "

Resshou removed his hand from my shoulder, and for a split moment, I truly thought he had fallen for my ruse, or at least, was going to let me off since I had tried to hard to fool him. That thought quickly left my mind as I watched him reach his hand deep into his robes. I shut my eyes. I didn't really wish to see what he was going to haul out.

Hearing a rustle in front of my face, I opened my eyes to see a deep red candy being held out in front of me. I looked up at Resshou-seinu confused. He had a huge sweet tooth to go along with his unstoppable pranking habit, and because of this, you were more likely to die of old age before you ever got him to share his beloved hard candies with you. But despite my reluctance, he merely gestured towards the treat and I couldn't help but take it. Unwrapping the candy, I popped it into my mouth and savored the cherry flavor. My favorite.

"Come with me, will you my Shen?" he asked, beginning to walk, though at a slowed pace as though he automatically assumed that I would follow, "I have something that I'd like to discuss with you. "

"D-discuss?"

"Yes, there's a last minute arrival that I'd like to introduce you to. "

"Really? Why's the guy so important anyway?"

"You'll see, " Resshou smiled once again, though stopped abruptly and smirked at me from over his shoulder, "Oh, and Shen hon, you're on my *list*. "

I nearly choked on the candy. I should have known it was too good to be true. Being on Resshou's 'list' was his way of saying that I had given him just what he needed as an excuse to prank me. I wasn't sure what was worse. Another months worth of stall duty with the horses, or a personal, one of a kind prank from the lord of prankhood himself. And I guessed the candy was either his way of sweetening the blow, or thanking me for giving him the opportunity.

"Somehow this candy just turned sour, " I muttered, following him as he continued walking through the courtyard.

"Oh now now, " he cooed, "You know the rules. Be happy that I won't be giving you a 'proper' punishment. "

"Yes sir. "

"Good girl. "

"You're really having a thrill over this, aren't you?"

"Oh yes. Most certainly. "

"And I'm going to entrust my wellbeing to you this year?"

"Oh yes. "

"Can I request a transfer?"

Resshou chuckled warmly, "My my, I can see I'll enjoy this year. "

"I'm sure you will Seinukaka, " I mumbled, though wasn't sure if I should push my mouthiness much further, "So, this guy, why do I have to meet him? You didn't introduce me to everybody last year, not even the teachers, and I would like to add that a warning about Abiki would have been appreciated-"

"Abiki-*seinu* dear, don't call seinu's by their names. "

"My question Resshou-ka, if you please?"

"He'll be joining you this year. "

"Joining me?"

"I've recommended him for Tai'shan. "

My jaw dropped, " *Tai'shan*???"

"Don't shout hon, you'll deafen me. "

"What *is* he?"

"Well that's not very polite. "

"You know what I mean. "

"You shall see when we get to the seuu cabins, " he explained, "The others need time to set up the second bed in Yohn anyway. "

"*Second bed?!*"

"The ears Shen, the ears."

"You....he....can't.....in...Yohn.....me....." I stammered, not being able to find my words, "You can't put a *boy* in *my* cabin!"

"It's not *your* cabin hon, Yohn is for Tai'shan-nins. *All* Tai'shan-nins. " Resshou corrected me.

"But!"

"I'm afraid 'but' isn't goin to cut it as a protest. "

"Why me?" I sighed, kicking a rock by my foot, "I don't handle roommates very well. "

"Shush now, I was actually worried that I wouldn't find someone else to join. " he confessed.

"What do you mean?"

"Tai'shan covers *all* possible fields you may have to overcome some day, " Resshou explained, as we rounded the courtyard and made our way to the seuu cabins, "And while most of that deals with one on one combat, you must also know how to operate in a group setting. While in desperate situations, I've been able to be a nins partner, it really is better if you have someone your own age. "

"Did I forget to mention that I'm anti-social?"

"You get along just fine with the seuu's. "

"I don't have to live with them. "

"You'll do just fine. I promise. " he assured me, "Ah, there he is. "

I stopped dead in my tracks as I caught sight of the young boy he had been referring to. Sitting on the stone steps, was a young boy, thirteen, maybe fourteen at the most. He had shoulder length black and red streaked hair, tied back in a small ponytail, with long bangs that hung down messily in his face; the entire right side of his face was completely hidden by them. His eyes, which I could see even from this distance -praise my new heritage- were an eerie shade of metallic silver, but dull and lifeless as old armor. He had tanned skin, not unlike my own but it was ravaged and torn with scars; long, thin scars that I could not mistake. Whips. He was tall as well, around five foot six, though unmistakably younger than myself; thirteen, maybe fourteen at most (so much for being 'my own age'). The heavy scowl on his face didn't comfort me much, and his scent was a mixture of old alcohol and horses. Somehow, Resshou's reassurance wasn't doing much for me at this point.

His clothing wasn't doing much for me either. His tunic top was patched, old and torn, and about three sizes too big for him. His slacks as well, so dirty that I couldn't tell what color they had originally been. His ears were pierced multiple times in both sides, as well his eyebrow on the left side had a silver loop in it. He was also in need of a good bath himself.

Though something about the boy seemed strangely familiar to me. That tanned skin and dark hair, the slim figure and placement of the scars. It was something I had heard of often in the Azra pack, and had seen more than once while traveling with Jian. That boy was a Matzu'en. There wasn't a doubt in my mind.

The Matzu'en used to have a large village located in a deep valley, almost in the center of the Azraken forest. But the key word was use to. It was said amongst the pack, that while the Matzu'en were the nicest, kindest, most loyal and trusting and helpful individuals that you could ever hope to meet, it was also the reason for their slow extinction. Besides for the few spears, bows, arrows and nets they kept for hunting and fishing purposes, they didn't own a single weapon. They couldn't fight either for the most part. Completely peaceful and passive. They were what people called a 'beautiful race', and a mixed race to boot. Long into their ancestry, the Matzu'en were once linked almost directly to the Dai'zen, and the Rian; a race marked by white hair, red eyes, pointed ears, and nearly black skin. Both extremely powerful and feared species, but all of those traits had long been lost in the Matzu'en and it left them helpless to protect themselves.

True, for the most part, the Matzu'en had no enemies. They were always there to help whomever needed them, and never asked for anything in return. It was the Choe, a vain race related the the Rian (except with green eyes, golden hair and pale skin) considered the Matzu'en to be 'exotic'. I remembered the tales of how the Choe would plunder and demolish the Matzu'en village little by little, taking many of the young men and women back to their own villages for use as slaves. The thought alone made me sick to my stomach. The Ananke and the Matzu'en honored each other highly, and worked together as one for many things, and as a matter of fact, the low-land Azra pack that lived in the crator had given it's honor to protect what remained of the village and the people. But the Ananke couldn't do much about the hundreds of Matzu'en who still remained enslaved to the Choe. It stood to reason why Tonna thought that people were beginning to lose their morals.

"Shen-han, allow me to introduce you to Matsuuru, Tomakhomii, " Resshou said, gesturing to the boy who got to his feet, albeit clearly unhappily, "And Tomakhomii, this is Kaiying, ShenTao. Well you two, shake hands. You'll be spending a lot of time together. "

Still scowling Tomakhomii extended his hand, and I too in return. But the second our skin touched, he retracted in shock as though I had nearly killed him. Though I as well, could not help but look down at my hand in surprise. When I touched his, it had been *warm*.

Ever since I had come to Khanshomei and received my new gifts, I had not once felt warmth *or* cold. My elemental ability kept my body temperature moderated at all times. Even to touch another person, to place my hand in fire, or in an icy stream, my element protected me and kept me from feeling a thing, or even being injured. So why now? And moreso to the point, why this boy?

"Ah, excellent!" Resshou exclaimed happily, "I see you two have discovered your seperate gifts. "

"*Gifts?*" Tomakhomii snorted, "What the hell *was* that?"

"Shen hon, would you like to take a shot at it?" Resshou asked with a smile, "What did you feel?"

"It..." I studded, still unsure about what was going on, "I felt...warmth. "

"Exactly. " Resshou nodded, "And Tomakhomii, what you most likely felt, was the chill from Shen. "

"Do...do I always feel cold to others?"

"No, no, " he comforted me, clearly hearing the worried tone in my voice, "It's merely because you used your ki such a short time ago. Normally you can't tell your temperature from regular peoples-"

"What in Dai is cold?" Tomakhomii sneered, giving me a dirty look, "And why do I only feel that from *this*. "

"Who are you calling 'this'? I have a name you little snot-"

"Little? Ha! I *step* on insects like you. "

"Now, now you two, that's quite enough, " Resshou interrupted, seeming to make sure that he was between us, "You see, you are both Elementals. Remember Tomakhomii-han? I explained this to you. "

The answer hit me like a bolt of lightning, "*He's* a fire elemental?!"

"Quite true Shen. "

"So then what is she?"

"She's an ice elemental. "

"But, " I retorted, returning Tomakhomii's evil look, "Why would a fire elemental effect me? I don't feel anything from other elementals. "

"Tomakhomii, like yourself Shen hon, is quite advanced, " Resshou said, smiling down at Tomakhomii, "That is why I'm glad that he has agreed to study here. Two such strong elementals as yourself, and opposites, it shall be a wondrous year this one. "

"So *that* is what cold feels like?" Tomakhomii muttered, "No wonder people bitch so much. Horrid thing. "

"You are *so* not telling me that you don't know what being cold feels like-"

"So what if I don't?!"

"Shen, Tomakhomii discovered his ability at a very young age. Remember that you've only been an ice elemental for the past few years. You had plenty of time to experience both temperature extremes. Tomakhomii has not had the chance to be so lucky. " Resshou added, apparently trying to do his best to keep our tempers even.

"Lucky?" Tomakhomii snorted, "You won't hear me complaining. She can keep her hands to herself!"

"My thoughts exactly. " I snapped.

Resshou sighed, "Shen, why don't you show Tomakhomii to Yohn? Shinesu should be finished setting up the second bed by now. Let him get his things sorted and put away and you can show him to the baths later on. "

"Baths?"

"You know which ones. "

"But those are *mine*!"

"No, I believe the seuu's had them long before you did hon. "

I muttered under my breath as I turned to leave, not waiting to see if Tomakhomii was actually following me or not; I could hear his footsteps behind me. That was all I needed to know.

"What *are* you anyway?"

"Excuse me?" I asked, not daring to turn around for the mere fear that I'd do something to him that I would regret, "What kind of a question is that?"

"You know exactly what I'm askin'. "

"And how can *you* tell?"

He gave a snort, "Ya can't be very 'advanced' if ya can't tell. "

"Really? I'd say the same thing to you since you apparently let the humans get you pretty easily. "

What he was refering to, was the fact that he was Dai'zen. Not a pure one, but at least a quarter of him was easily. It was apparently in his strangely colored eyes, and in the small fangs that had clearly been beginning to grow over the past little while. Mixed breed Dai'zen, didn't start developing normal racial traits until their teens, which meant that he was just the right age to start. As well, the streaks in his hair was a near dead give away. Humans feared Dai'zen. They were nearly petrified of them. And to make sure that the rest of the species knew that someone was of Dai'zen blood, they would force feed a young one a solution in public ceremonies that caused their normal hair color to sprout odly colored streaks. There was no way to remove them, either by washing them out, or by another solution, so the Dai'zen was cursed to stick out for the rest of their life.

"So? Answer my question. " he insisted.

"If you don't shut up and keep walking, you'll find out. "

"Somehow that threat does little to worry me. "

"You're Dai'zen, can't you at least *sense* it?"

"Please, don't give me that crock. All this feely meditation crap is nothing more than that. Crap. " he snorted.

"Dai, give me strenght, " I sighed, turning to walk up the steps of Yohn as he continued to follow me, "Let's get this over with quick. The bed to the left, see it? That's *mine*. Off limits. If I catch your grubby mits near it, I'll chomp them off. That one to the right, I'm assuming that set that one up for you. You'll have to make it, the seuu's left you your sheets. The door at the back leads to the washroom, should you need it. There are shelves above each bed for anything you wish to put there, and that dresser is yours. Put in it what you want. Nins are responsible for doing their own laundry. So you are hereby warned. And that's about it. "

"This is all we get?"

"What are you talking about? This cabin is twice the size of the other ones, and there's only *two* of us. " I pointed out.

"I suppose, " he murmured, going over and flopping down on the bed, "So when's eats?"

"Not for another couple of hours-"

"Well, I'll be taking a nap then, " he cut in, "Wake me up when it's time, will ya?"

Before I could answer, Tomakhomii had rolled over and was quite blantly ignoring me. About ready to kill him, I gave up, sighed, and went back out to sit under the door frame. Leaning against the warm, smooth wood again, I could almost forget about the ignorant little twat that just happened to be occupying a great deal of my space right now. A part of me couldn't help but wonder how Resshou-seinu managed to find this one. A Matzu'en who acted like anything *but* a Matzu'en. But I also couldn't help but feel a twinge of curiosity. Those scars were caused by whips, I knew that for sure, I had seen far too many slaves in this world not to recognize the signs by now. So it made me wonder if his bad attitude was to be expected. Maybe that's where Resshou had found him. It could be said then, that perhaps Resshou had saved him from an otherwise malicious existence.

I brought my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them, the heat of the day beginning to take its toll on me. I couldn't help but smirk when I had to think he acted a lot like me when I first arrived here. People thought I was mouthy and blunt now? Ha! The way I acted nowadays was nothing compared to what I used to be....back when I felt I couldn't trust anyone. I had lots of people that I trusted now. The seinu's, Kote'iki and Koi, and countless members of Azra. I had been given plenty of reasons so soften up over the years, and while it was hard as Dai to gain my trust, it was still better than never having it at all; that's how I used to be.

I looked down at the hand I had used to shake Tomakhomii's with. I don't know why, but I felt funny about that. It had been so long since I'd touched another creature and felt such warmth. Even when Jian was nursing me back to health, when we were traveling together and he laid beside me at night, when we were training and he playfully put me in all of those head locks; I had never once felt his warmth. I guess I hadn't realized just how much I missed it.

Gazing back into the shadows of the cabin, I wrinkled my nose as I heard a snore coming from the right side and a sinking feeling came over me at the thought of what I might have to put up with that night. *Perhaps though*, I thought, clenching the hand into a fist, *perhaps it won't be so bad. If anything, maybe I'll learn a lot from you, eh Tomakhomii?*

Another snore was my answer, and I couldn't help but smirk. Instead, I got to my feet once again and headed back towards the seinu cabins. Resshou-seinu had said that it was Shinesu who set up Tomakhomii's bed, which meant that he was back from Tyui break, which in turn, meant that he most likely had some delicious sweets that I could mooch off of him. That would make up for all of this easily. Or so I hoped.